

FORDS THEATRE SOCIETY

Drawer 13A

FORDS THEATRE

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The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Ford's Theatre Society

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Ford's Theatre National Historic Site
<http://www.nps.gov/foth/faqs.htm>

What happened to the Ford's Theatre building after the assassination?

The building was saved from destruction when Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, ordered a 24-hour guard be placed around the brick building to protect it from an angry crowd wanting to burn it down because of the assassination.

In July of 1865, theatre owner John T. Ford was ready to resume performances but emotions ran high against the reopening; the theatrical operations did not resume. At the same time, Washington's YMCA announced in the newspapers its intention to purchase the building and to open Ford's Theatre in its décor of April 14, 1865; it would be renamed "The Abraham Lincoln Memorial Temple". Within a few weeks this plan faded away due to lack of financial support.

The federal government managed to negotiate a deal with Ford to rent the building with an option to buy. In the fall of 1865, a Brooklyn firm removed the entire interior of the building and converted it into a federal office building for \$28,000. No alterations were made to the façade but three floors of the office space were created inside. The option to buy was exercised in 1867 and the government purchased the structure for \$100,000.

The building operated as an office until June 9, 1893 when the interior of the historic building collapsed. Twenty-two clerks died in the tragedy and sixty-eight others were seriously injured. Within a year the damage was repaired and the former theatre was remodeled into a government warehouse; again the original was altered.

The building remained in this form until 1931 when workers returned to modify the first floor. It was converted into a museum dedicated to displaying artifacts of the life of our sixteenth president. Many of the museums artifacts were from the Osborn Oldroyd collection which had been purchased for \$50,000 in 1927 including dozens of unique items associated with the assassination.

During the 1950's a bill was introduced in Congress to fund the restoration of Ford's Theatre to its 1865 appearance. In 1968, the fully restored Ford's Theatre reopened as a working theatre, 103 years after the assassination of President Lincoln. Also in 1968, the Ford's Theatre Society became a partner with the national park service.

In October 2008, Ford's Theatre became an independent unit of the National Park Service system managed by a park superintendent with a staff consisting of park interpreters, maintenance and curatorial support along with volunteers who help tell the story of the theatre and the National Park Service mission. Ford's Theatre National Historic Site is co-managed by the National Park Service and the Ford's Theatre Society.

FORD'S THEATRE SOCIETY

SUITE 1110, 1100 CONNECTICUT AVENUE, N.W. • WASHINGTON, D. C. 20006

(202) 293-1990

April 8, 1968

Dr. R. Gerald McMurty, Director
Lincoln National Life Foundation
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801

Dear Dr. McMurty:

Ford's Theatre officially reopened January 30 with a gala program of music, dance and drama presented by the Ford's Theatre Society. Mrs. Johnson served as honorary chairman while members of the President's cabinet were hosts for the evening. The all-star reopening was planned with one thing in mind -- that Ford's Theatre should be a living memorial to Abraham Lincoln and his devotion to the performing arts.

The government has restored the theatre at a cost of \$2.7 million and will maintain it as an historical site and tourist attraction. During February alone 35,000 people visited the building.

The Jackson Hole Preserve, headed by Laurance Rockefeller, has purchased a small building adjoining the theatre for \$94,000 and is holding it for the government. The Department of the Interior will seek sufficient government funds to purchase the building from the Jackson Hole Preserve and to renovate it in a style compatible with the theatre.

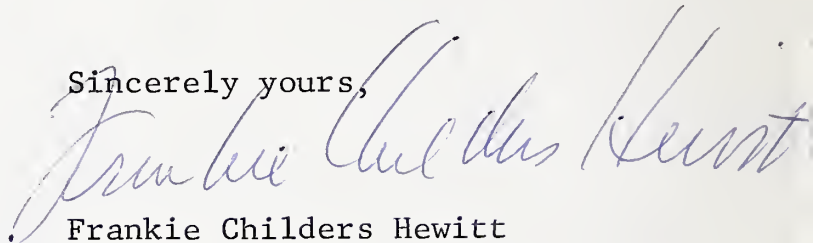
Now a unique opportunity exists for private citizens to collaborate with the government at the highest executive level to make sure that Ford's Theatre is used in the most meaningful way. The Ford's Theatre Society, a private nonprofit organization, has signed a ten year contract with the Department of the Interior under which the Society will have the use of the theatre eight months a year for live theatrical presentations.

During the next few months, the Society will be seeking the support of leading citizens, corporations and foundations for this exciting and worthwhile effort. May I take this opportunity to invite you to join with others in helping to create a meaningful memorial to one of our greatest presidents while we also create a real cultural asset for our nation's capital.

The Society will want to recognize all contributors of gifts in excess of \$250 in the playbills distributed at each performance. Donations of \$1,000 or more will entitle the donor to be listed in the special recognition book to be displayed in the theatre. Donors of \$5,000 and more will receive appropriate recognition on a wall in the theatre complex. Won't you take this opportunity to invest in Ford's Theatre?

Thank you.

Sincerely yours,



Frankie Childers Hewitt
President

FCH:lm

FORD'S THEATRE SOCIETY

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1968

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Washington, D. C.



One on the Aisle

Ford Friends Have No Plan

By Richard L. Coe

SINCE THE FORD'S Theater Society announcement last week of its highly nebulous "plans" for next season, I have looked into the National Repertory Theater's record and proposals for the theater.

The record is impressive and the proposals firm. That NRT has not been requested to follow up what admittedly has been an exploratory season suggests that the Ford's Theater Society misses the point of its own existence.

There is irony here, for when it came to producers interested in playing Ford's, only two stepped forward:

NRT's Michael Dewell and Lucille Lortel, of New York's ANTA. Since the latter is not equipped to present plays outside its own matinee series, Mrs. Lortel shifted her support to NRT.

After Equity's long efforts to open up another stage to live actors, it was surprising that more didn't leap to this opportunity. The knowledgeable did, of course, see built-in drawbacks, especially a limited seating capacity.

Anxious about the relationship between a producing organization and the Government, Dewell took a step which since has become ironic. As a buffer he suggested creation of the Ford's Theater Society, which would handle the company's dealings with the department of the Interior. This was headed and still is by New York's Frankie Childers Hewitt, wife of TV producer Don Hewitt.

The high costs of production and administration are Mrs. Hewitt's reasons for not taking up NRT's proposals for next season. But this was known from the beginning, it being obvious to all that outside funds would be needed to

support a professional resident company in a theater seating roughly 600, of which many seats went to students at half price.

All this was foreseen in NRT's prospectus and in its future plans as well. In the eight years since this touring company's formation, it has raised over a million and a half dollars from various sources without the employment of a professional money raiser. NRT's decision to come to Ford's was predicated on the idea that it would have three seasons in which to only American repertory company without one and it was the only group to step forward with a firm plan.

This season it did three plays before audiences 93 per cent sold out. This is a strikingly high average but, of course, Ford's is a unique theater and should do this well. To some knowledgeable theatergoers the performance standard was far from impressive but on the other hand the company has rafts of letters indicating genuine satisfaction with its three productions, "John Brown's Body," "The Comedy of Errors" and "The Stoops to Conquer." It played host to 16,300 school children from 29 states. In its first season, it achieved 12,000 subscri-

bers, a figure not usually reached until a theater has been in operation some years.

For next season, NRT proposed a star revival of Norman Corwin's "The Rivalry," a continuation of "John Brown's Body" and the addition of one Shakespearean and one modern play. This is in line with the aim of accenting material pertinent to the historic house. NRT also has outlined two alternatives of fund-raising. Actually, some \$600,000 of this season's funds came from NRT's activities. NRT proposes a special plan for D.C. school children. Virginia sent over 5000, Maryland over 4000, the District not quite 3000. It schools whose students are wants a special plan for D.C. from strikingly lower income brackets than those of the surrounding states.

That Mrs. Hewitt and her executive committee turned down NRT's proposals, indeed reneged on the original experiment of three seasons would be understandable if something better were in prospect. But despite elaborately dropped hints that other organizations were interested, including the magical name of David Merrick, the best that Mrs. Hewitt comes up with are nebulous discussions involving three Washington theaters which obviously have all they can do to manage their own plans.

Secretary Udall, of the proprietary Interior Department, has wisely stayed out of this maze and is considering a disinterested advisory board for himself and future Secretaries.

The bitterest irony is that persons wholly inexperienced in the theater have edged into the catbird seat. One must join Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) in hoping, as he wrote recently, that NRT still will be invited to follow up its courageous start.

adjust from being a touring company to at last having a home base -- it is the ~~only~~

Wednesday, June 5, 1968

VARIETY

Ford's-NRT Marriage Ends in Money Spat; Next Season in Doubt

Washington, June 4.

The Ford's Theatre Society and the National Repertory Theatre have parted company on considerably less than friendly terms.

Although the Society, a non-profit private group which raises the money to finance performances in the restored theatre where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, originally disclosed that NRT would play three seasons in a row, the only contract with NRT was for the first season. It was not renewed.

Society officers and NRT people are reportedly still arguing about money, which they have been doing almost constantly since NRT opened the first play there, "John Brown's Body," last Feb. 12. NRT had insisted on taking over all administrative responsibilities and reportedly agreed to a \$2,000 per week flat fee to cover those costs. But NRT continually came back for more money.

There are so many stories around town about NRT's handling of money, it is impossible to separate fact from rumor. It can be said that professional theatrical people were astonished at what was obviously extra high cost costuming for all three plays, booked for only 26 weeks. "Comedy of Errors" costumes seemed excessively expensive.

The Society has announced that henceforth it will run its own theatre and will soon hire an executive director.

Mrs. Frankie Childers Hewitt, Society president and wife of CBS Producer Don Hewitt, said three local professional companies, the Olney Theatre, Washington The-

Ford's-NRT Split

Continued from page 53

atre Club and Arena Stage, will assist in structuring a permanent administrative staff for Ford's. What will happen next season is not yet clear. Mrs. Hewitt said the three local professional theatres may present some performances there and that "outstanding groups from around the country" will be asked to make guest appearances.

Mrs. Hewitt also suggested that Ford's should be more flexible than limiting plays to those popular in Lincoln's time. Under consideration are new plays and musicals, as well as others written after Lincoln's death.

Mrs. Hewitt did not openly discuss quarreling with NRT about money, but her statement did include this: "While the season just concluded was more than 90% sold out, box office revenues barely covered 50% of NRT's production, administrative and operating costs."

The theatre could hardly break even however. It has only 742 usable seats and a \$5 top.

NRT to Put Up Battle To Return as Resident Troupe at Ford's, Wash.

The National Repertory Theatre will put up a fight to remain at Ford's Theatre in Washington. Michael Dewell, the troupe's producer and cofounder, says he will take NRT's case to the Ford's Theatre Society board of directors, and he's confident that the company will be invited back for another season.

As Dewell tells it, the NRT ouster is comparable to the Indians bouncing the chiefs. Ford's Theatre Society was created at the suggestion of NRT, to serve as a "buffer" between the company and the Federal Government, the producer says. He claims that a "power grab" by the FTS exec committee, without the approval of the entire board, is the principal issue.

There was no overspending by NRT during its three-play season at the historical Washington legit-er, Dewell declares. He concedes, however, that the Society has a 10-year contract with the Government to run the theatre, and therefore has the power to give NRT the gate.

Dewell says NRT's principal antagonist, Mrs. Frankie Childers Hewitt, president of the Society, didn't report the full financial story about the NRT season. He says that the company played to 93% capacity houses, brought in the three productions ("John Brown's Body," "Comedy of Errors" and "She Stoops to Conquer") for a total of \$200,000, and raised the bulk of the \$643,000 first-year expenditures itself. The producer attributes the deficit, about \$50,000, to the failure of the FTS to raise sufficient funds, which was one of the purposes for its formation.

Dewell denies that extravagant sums were spent on costuming, as Mrs. Hewitt has charged, and that NRT took over all administrative responsibilities at the theatre for a flat \$2,000 fee. He says the duds for "Comedy," designed by Jane Greenwood, cost \$12,000, admittedly steep, but can and will be used again. The costumes for "John Brown's Body," by Alvin Colt, cost \$5,000, and the clothes for "Conquer" were donated.

Dewell has already sounded out many of the members of the Society board and says he has received pledges of support.

Whither Ford's Theater? Future's Not Too Bright

By Richard L. Coe

Working towards a new, permanent home, a local resident professional theater has been told that its services might be welcomed at Ford's next season. As a result, its own plans have been bubbling uncertainly on a week-to-week basis for several months.

• An established touring company has been unable to make plans for its coming season.

• A small convention recently sought to buy a block of seats to a performance next winter at Ford's Theater. It couldn't be done.

THESE AND MANY more hangups result from the inefficient amateurs presently in command of the Ford's Theater Society.

Theater has hard enough a time surviving in Washington or anywhere without coping with dilettantism. Only wretched inexperience could have brought Ford's coming season to its present impasse.

The situation in this. When the Interior Department, not wild about the idea, was pressed to accept the notion of turning the restored building into a living theater and not simply a static memorial, there was enthusiasm for the plan from the professional theater, led by Equity, and the theater-hungry public. Interior took hold and has done a marvelous job with its responsibility.

Several producers stepped forward but only one group had a firm plan, the National Repertory Theater, headed by Michael Dewell and Frances Ann Dougherty. The idea was that only productions in keeping with Ford's history would be suitable for the theater and that NRT's experience as a touring professional repertory company could supply this in both its play choices and production standards.

Rather than deal directly with the Government, Dewell suggested creation of a group whose prime concern would be standards for the theater. This became the Ford's Theater Society. Its chairman is Frankie Childers Hewitt, a lady of no theatrical experience.

THAT MOVE TURNED out to be ironic, for after encouraging NRT to believe it would have three seasons to prove its worth, the Society has not extended the company beyond the 14-week season which began last February.

In a thousand-word press release, Mrs. Hewitt announced that plans were in the works for next season. She stated that NRT's high costs of productions were the reason that it would not be invited to return and that she was working with three Washington theaters to fill next season's programs.

What Mrs. Hewitt did not say was that the Society, which still owes the acting company \$125,000, actually paid NRT less than the sum of what NRT brought into Ford's through the box office, its own benefits by Friends of Ford's or as donation sources.

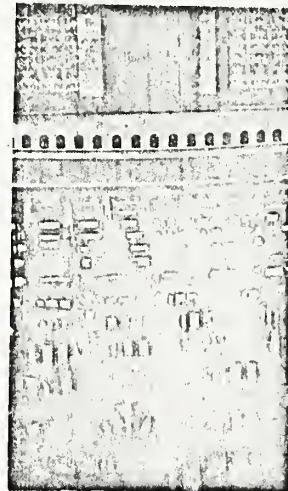
Mrs. Hewitt did not make the point that no resident professional theaters seating a trifle more than 600 can be expected to pay its way. No theater with three plays in repertory can balance its books without far more than the box office receipts.

more funds by itself than the Society latched onto. The Society hired a professional fund-raiser and incurred considerable legal fees, matters I mention because they have been ignored previously.

Mrs. Hewitt also failed to point out that the three Washington theater groups mentioned have quite enough of their own to worry about than to take on Ford's problems as well.

The most prominent of these has been the Washington Theater Club, which has been negotiating for a new home on Capitol Hill. This has been sidetracked to consider the Ford's venture.

The fly in all this is that the Club already has announced its program



Ford's Stands Empty

for next season, a very interesting line up of new or unfamiliar plays. Of the nine only one is conceivably pertinent to Ford's, "Mr. Tambo, Mr. Bones," by Alexander Panos, dealing with John Wilkes Booth and Abraham Lincoln. Its other choices include "The Firebugs," "Look Up Your Daughters," "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui," and "Joe Egg." These have no conceivable connection with the Lincoln period.

I mean no slurs against the admirable Washington Theater Club, which has been carving out a niche for itself as the Washington champion of modern thought and drama. I do complain about the Society's lack of sensitivity.

Concerned with preparation for an expanded company, with construction of its own second theater and continuation of its subscription repertory, Arena Stage has quite enough to handle. Father Gilbert V. Harke's Catholic University Theater does not presume to be a professional company. Its graduate touring adjunct already is scheduled for next season and its major concern must be building a long-delayed new theater on the C.U. campus.

Thus, the "announcement" is a maze of holes.

THE DISTINGUISHED star and former president of ANTA, Peggy Wood, has observed as a member of the

have been made by the board's executive committee of three non-professionals without a vote by the full board. Besides Miss Wood this board includes producer Robert Wise, Sen. Milton R. Young (R-S.D.) and Rep. Julia Hansen (D-Wash.) among others. Their professional assignments make board meetings difficult to schedule and a recent meeting has been put off from week to week by Mrs. Hewitt. The more time that goes by without firm, constructive action, the more uncertain next season becomes for Ford's.

Dewell has now come up with a plan whereby his organization would raise the money for its second season. Since this is the firmest project in hand, one would think that the board and its executive committee would welcome the offer.

The needless shillyshallying recalls what Dewell wrote for this paper on Feb. 11:

NRT at Ford's could become a permanent resident repertory theater—specializing in plays of Lincoln's day and plays about him and his times. We hope to commission new plays which demonstrate the ideals and beliefs which represented so effectively that his tall frame casts an even longer shadow today than it did in 1865.

To build such a company takes time. Not one season or two seasons or five seasons but many years. I wonder—with 90 per cent of the world thinking themselves as theater experts—if NRT at Ford's will be given the time required . . . Will it be given the time by this city? And by our employers, the Ford's Theater Society? And by our landlords, the United States Park Service? . . . Or will they grow impatient of beginnings and demand instant greatness? Often that is what happens in other cities. . . .

While I lacked enthusiasm for the artistic levels NRT achieved with its first productions, they bear comparison with others here and abroad. Having failed, despite a flurry of carefully planted rumors to involve the lively David Merrick for next season and having succeeded only in ginning the plans of other groups, the Society's amateur leaders would do all concerned a service by joining an odyssey to the moon.

Since there are professionals on the Society's board, it is high time they got back in control.



NRT's Michael Dewell

FORD THEATER PLANS A YEAR-ROUND STAFF

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 1—The Ford Theater Society's executive committee plans to form a year-round administrative staff "whose prime concern will be the perpetuation of living theater at Ford's."

An executive director, with over-all responsibility for running Ford's Theater and managing the society's affairs, will be designated within the next few weeks, the society announced.

Mrs. Frank Childers Hewitt, the society president, said that managements of local theaters, such as the Olney Theater in Maryland, and the Washington Theater Club and Arena Stage, had responded to a request

that they help form a permanent administrative staff for Ford's Theater, and participate in the 1968-69 season as producing units.

The National Repertory Theater produced and administered the first season at Ford's, which was more than 90 per cent sold out.

But Mrs. Hewitt said the box-office revenues barely covered 50 per cent of the N.R.T.'s production costs, and that it appeared to be economically unrealistic to try to support a large repertory troupe in the 742-seat house on a year-round basis.



IN REPLY REFER TO:

H30(NCR-NACC)
(X A40)

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS—CENTRAL
900 OHIO DRIVE, S.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20242

Ford's Theatre

call

007 29 1981

Dr. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Director
Mr. John David Smith, Curator
Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum
1300 South Clinton Street
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801

Dear Dr. Neely and Mr. Smith:

You are invited to attend a public hearing at Ford's Theatre November 23, 1981, at 5 p.m. The purpose of the meeting is to explain and describe redirection of the Lincoln Museum exhibit to provide more emphasis on events leading up to the assassination of President Lincoln, its aftermath, and its historical implications for the nation.

The present museum in the lower level of Ford's Theatre deals with Abraham Lincoln's life and career and secondarily, with the assassination of the President. Problems of effectiveness and functioning of existing exhibits are overshadowed by the factor of misplaced emphasis. Completely redesigned exhibits will place primary emphasis on the events of April 14 and 15, 1865. The secondary theme is the conspiracy and those involved. Some treatment of the funeral of President Lincoln is appropriate to complete the story.

One of the most frequently posed questions by visitors is, "Why did Booth shoot Lincoln?" One suspects that fascination with the assassin's motivation has something to do with the semi-deification of Lincoln during the ensuing century; surely the act required an extraordinary deviant. The short answer to the question--that Booth identified with the Southern cause--is insufficient without some awareness of the mood of the time. Although Lincoln had been inaugurated for a second term the month before, he was not universally regarded as a saviour, even in the North, as newspaper headlines and political cartoons indicate. Although Lee had

**Year of
the
Visitor**

surrendered at Appomattox, the war was not over, and after 4 years of carnage and chaos, it was perhaps not inconceivable to suppose that a dramatic blow at the heads of state could at least prolong the conflict. So it seemed to Booth and the other conspirators.

An objective of exhibits, therefore, is to establish the temper of the times. Exhibits dealing with the events surrounding the assassination and its aftermath will take advantage of objects in the collection not used heretofore, as well as displaying the significant artifacts now on view in a more effective manner. Individual case security must be addressed as well as overall building security and fire protection.

The exhibits need not be sequential, since it is not essential to grasp phrases of the story, e.g., "Temper of the Times," "Booth," "The Conspirators," "Trial," "Execution," etc., in any order. There are no exhibits at the Petersen House (House Where Lincoln Died), consequently some treatment of that phase of the story in Ford's Theatre would not be redundant.

Entry into the theatre from the street is awkward, both from a physical and an orientation standpoint. Visitors passing the ticket booth may or may not be greeted and oriented, depending on the crowd. Since the place is designed as a theatre and not a visitor center, any solution will be more or less unsatisfactory and requires some experimentation. A program board briefly describing points of interest (theatre, President's box, museum, live talk schedule, Petersen House) needs to be placed at one or more strategic places: theatre lobby, just inside theatre, outside on a sandwich board.

An audiovisual facility is needed for two purposes: to provide a substitute for talks in the theatre during matinee performances, and for special uses, namely school groups and assemblages of Lincoln scholars. The balcony behind the exhibit area would provide seating for 60-80 people. It would require a wall the length of the area and probably another set of stairs to satisfy codes. Whether this area is used depends on overall redesign of the museum. Both conventional projection equipment and video cassette equipment will be provided.

The park brochure, which appropriately combines Ford's Theatre and Petersen House, needs to be revised, if only to eliminate the explanation of the exhibits. When new exhibits are installed, a separate publication should be produced serving as a "gallery guide" for those with a more than casual interest in the artifacts and the stories connected with them.

The new exhibit would embody the interest and concerns expressed by a variety of persons over the years. We believe the new exhibit concept responds to a widely held consensus of thought on the subject.

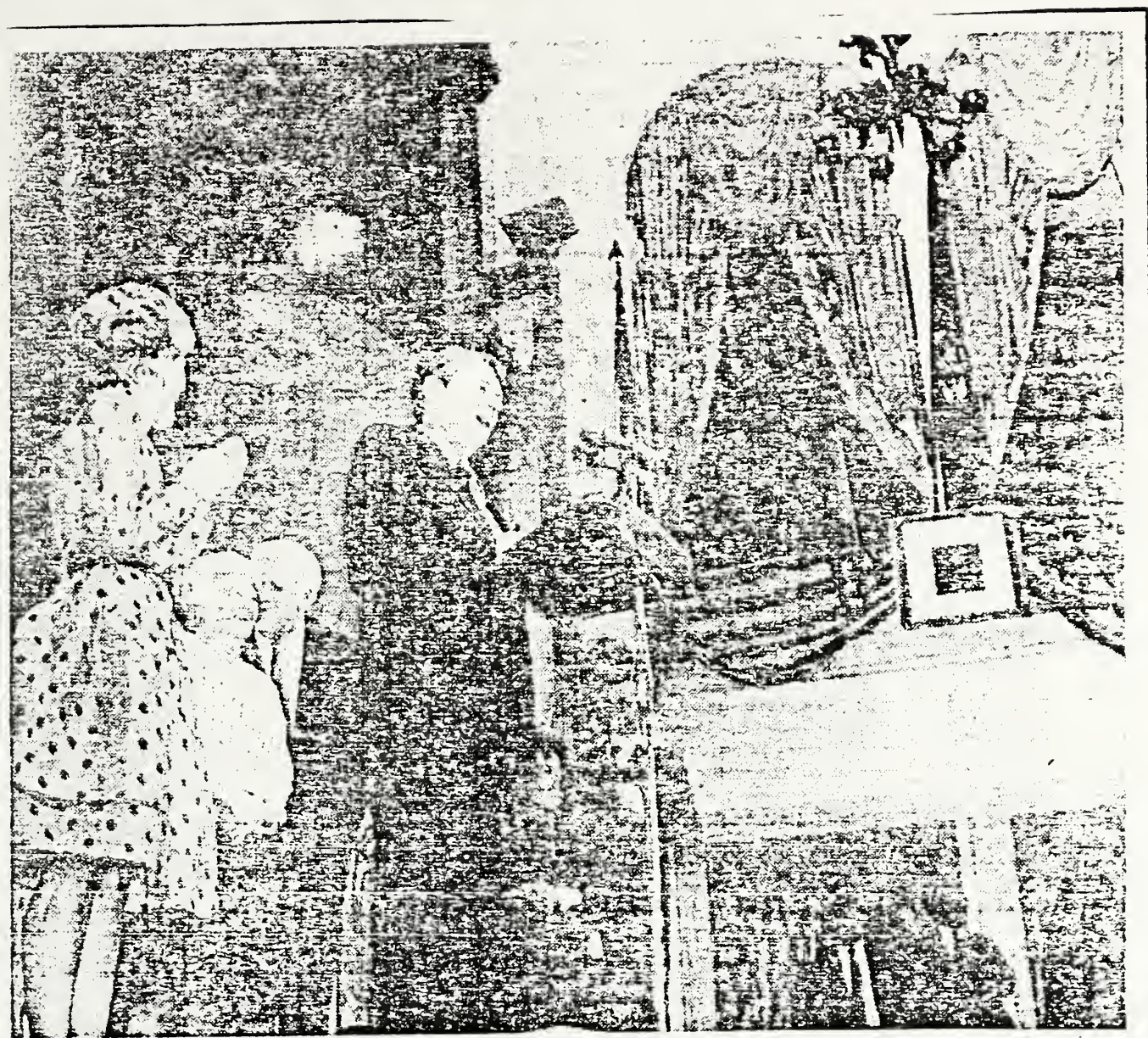
Hopefully, you will be able to attend. We solicit your comments so that we may refine our exhibit plan and interpretation to assure utmost historical accuracy and effectiveness.

If you have any questions about the upcoming hearing, please feel free to contact the Site Manager, Mr. Ed Footmon, or the Assistant Site Manager, Mr. Tom Peyton, both of whom can be reached on (202) 426-6924.

Sincerely,

William F. Outback

Superintendent
National Capital Parks-Central



AP

Keeping Ford's in our future. President Reagan speaks to audience as wife, Nancy, and House Speaker Tip O'Neill and wife, Mildred, join him on stage at Washington's Ford's Theater last night after benefit preview of "On Shiloh Hill," a Civil War musical. Reagans helped raise money for theater by giving White House reception for preview patrons. At upper right is box where President Lincoln was shot 119 years ago.

